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ABSTRACT

Frequent, quality contact with faculty and professional staff (including academic advisors) has been associated with increased retention among undergraduate college and university students. Communication apprehension (CA) associated with interacting with faculty during academic advising may have a negative impact on retention. An instrument was developed and tested for measuring CA specifically associated with interacting with faculty and academic advisors, by altering the 24-item version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension to a 6-item Faculty/Advisor CA scale. Three major theories seek to explain the genesis of CA: excessive activation, inappropriate cognitive processing, and inadequate communication skills. Some practical ways to reduce the anxiety of advisees experiencing dysfunctional levels of CA in the academic advising context include: creating a relaxing environment, helping students realize that they are in control of their destiny by taking them slowly through graduation requirements, helping students relabel their arousal as a positive rather than negative emotion (i.e. excitement rather than dread), and not forgetting politeness and friendliness in favor of "efficiency" in the advising session. Further suggestions include: reducing uncertainty through general information sessions about advising and registration procedures, setting clear expectations and then rigorously conforming to them, adding structure and predictability to the advising process, and initiating contact with apprehensive students rather than waiting for them to come to the advisor. (An appendix contains the Faculty/Advisor Communication Measure.) (SR)

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COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AND ACADEMIC ADVISING: ADVISING THE COMMUNICATIVELY APPREHENSIVE STUDENT

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RUNNING HEAD: CA AND ACADEMIC ADVISING

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Abstract

Frequent, quality contact with faculty and professional staff (including academic advisors) has been associated with increased retention among undergraduate college and university students. Communication apprehension (CA) associated with interacting with faculty and staff, then, may have a negative impact on retention. For this reason, addressing means to reduce CA in academic advising settings should be of interest to both faculty and professional academic advisors (often one-in-the-same, especially at smaller colleges and universities). This paper seeks to: a) provide a quick and reliable method of identifying students who may experience CA associated with interacting with academic advisors, and b) suggest several practical approaches to reducing CA in the academic advising setting.

Communication Apprehension and Academic Advising: Advising the Communicatively Apprehensive Student

Frequent, quality contact with faculty and professional staff (including academic advisors) has been associated with increased retention among undergraduate college and university students. Communication apprehension (CA) associated with interacting with faculty and staff, then, may have a negative impact on retention. Given the need for increased retention efforts in an era of declining college-aged population, as well as the simple mandate to provide a necessary service (academic advising) in the most effective and efficient manner, communication educators should focus some energies on improving academic advising, especially for the communicatively apprehensive student.

Academic advising, especially at smaller colleges and universities, is handled primarily by full-time faculty, who may or may not have advising training. To their credit, many faculty do an excellent job with the majority of students who depend on their guidance to maneuver through myriad obstacles on the way to timely graduation. The needs of communicatively apprehensive students, however, may require a specialized approach. Since approximately 20 percent of the population falls into the "high CA" category (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989), academic advisors can expect to come into contact with a number of communicatively apprehensive students during their tenure as advisors. Given the

probability of encountering apprehensive students, academic advisors need to know how best to work with them. This paper seeks to provide academic advisors with two tools to help them to improve their advising of communicatively apprehensive students: a) a quick and reliable method of identifying students who may experience CA associated with interacting with academic advisors, and b) several practical methods of reducing CA in the academic advising setting.

Communication Apprehension and Retention

Since one of the driving reasons for undertaking this research was the purported relationship between communication apprehension (CA) and retention, the initial phase of this project involved a review of literature relevant to the role of CA in the retention process. Regarding retention, it was not surprising to find that study after study supported Tinto's (1989) argument that academic and social integration are the keys to improved student retention. The route to integration, according to Tinto, is frequent and rewarding interpersonal contact between members of the faculty and professional staff and students. A number of studies support this contention. For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (1977) found that informal faculty/student interaction is a significant predictor of student persistence in college. Pascarella (1980) discovered a modest, but statistically significant relationship between informal faculty/student contact and retention of freshmen into the

sophomore year. Endo and Harpel (1982) report that frequent, quality faculty/student interactions impact positively on students' personal, intellectual and academic outcomes. Similar findings had been reported previously (Centra & Rock, 1971). In short, it is clear that frequent, quality interactions between faculty, professional staff and students increases the possibilities of student retention and academic success.

Given that students who fail to achieve frequent, quality interactions with faculty and professional staff are at risk of "drop-out" or academic failure, it behooves us to identify these students. It is likely that one group of students at risk of failing to achieve frequent, quality contacts would be those students who suffer from high levels of communication apprehension. Communication apprehension (CA) is defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 13). Unfortunately, little is known about the role of CA in the retention process. Chandler, Cosner and Spies (1979) found a relationship between <u>generalized</u> (not communication) anxiety and non-persistence in a course among college students. McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield and Payne (1989) report that students with high CA were more likely to drop-out of college than students with low CA. This effect was strongest in the first two years of college.

Some evidence exists, then, that CA is related to retention. More research is needed to isolate aspects of CA that are most relevant to retention. Tinto and others' research would seem to indicate that CA associated with interacting with faculty and professional staff may play an important role in the retention process. Academic advising is one of the more common scenarios in which faculty and students interact on a one-on-one basis outside of the classroom, and so, is important to the discussion of CA and retention.

Identifying the Communicatively Apprehensive Student

As no instrument existed that measured this type of CA (i.e., that associated with interacting with faculty/academic advisors) directly, the next step in the project was to develop a measure of CA specifically associated with interacting with faculty and academic advisors. As was noted earlier, in smaller college and universities, full-time faculty and academic advisors are often one-in-the-same.

Communication with faculty and advisors is a special case of interpersonal communication (i.e., communication between two parties). Communication with faculty and advisors differs from generic interpersonal communication in several ways. First, the faculty member or academic advisor is most likely of higher status than the student advisee. The status differential could result in a higher degree of formality than normal interpersonal interaction. In addition, the student may fear evaluation from

the faculty member or academic advisor. Both formality and fear of evaluation have been shown to increase CA (Daly, 1978). In addition, students know (or soon come to realize) that failing to establish and maintain good interpersonal relations with faculty and academic advisors negatively impacts their chances for success in school. In summary, interaction with faculty and academic advisors does differ in significant ways from interaction with generic "others." Measures of generic interpersonal communication, therefore, although providing a good basis for scale development, are not adequate in themselves to measure CA associated with interacting with faculty members and academic advisors.

According to Richmond and McCroskey (1989), CA associated with interacting with faculty and academic advisors would be a case of audience-based CA. Audience-based CA is CA associated with communicating with a certain individual or group of individuals across time. Although traitlike CA and audience-based CA are related, the latter is more closely related to situational constraints than to personality type. From the perspective of retention, then, audience-based CA associated with interacting with faculty and advisors could be even more critical than traitlike CA to retention efforts.

For these reasons, development of a simple, easy to administer scale focusing specifically on audience-based CA related to interacting with faculty and academic advisors seemed

justified. While measures such as SCAM (Situational Communication Apprehension Measure) could be used to assess CA once a student has experienced interactions with faculty and academic advisors, educators needed a measure of Faculty/Advisor CA that could be assessed prior to an affected student's arrival at school, so that effective intervention could take place in a timely manner.

In an attempt to identify such a measure, an already existing interpersonal CA measure was alterred to create a pilot instrument to measure CA associated with interacting with faculty and advisors. The logical choice seemed to be the Interpersonal CA subscale of the PRCA-24 (24-item version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension) (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989). The PRCA-24 is a well established and widely used measure of CA. To create the Faculty/Advisor CA scale, the original scale was alterred to read "a member of the faculty or an academic advisor" where "an acquaintance" previously read or where no referent was given. A copy of the Faculty/Advisor CA scale is presented in the Appendix.

The next phase of the project involved pilot testing of the newly developed Faculty/Advisor CA scale for reliability and validity. Reliability of the instrument was assessed through the calculation of Cronbach's Alpha, a widely accepted index of an instrument's internal reliability. Validity was assessed through

factor analysis and a comparison of the new scale to an established measure of communication apprehension, the PRCA-24.

Extensive pilot testing revealed that the instrument evidenced a high degree of reliability (α=.91). In addition, the Faculty/Advisor CA instrument was shown to measure a construct that was a component of the general factor, communication apprehension, and appeared to be a valid measure of a component of CA that was related to, but distinct from, the four previously established components of communication apprehension (i.e., formal meeting, group discussion, interpersonal, public speaking).[1] Given the support from the pilot testing data, it appears that the six-item Faculty/Advisor CA scale is an effective and efficient means for identifying students who might experience CA associated with interacting with academic advisors.

Some may ask, "Isn't it possible to identify communicatively apprehensive students through their behavior?" Unfortunately, manifested behavior is not a reliable indicator of the presence of CA, as CA is an <u>intrapersonally</u> experienced phenomenon. In the absence of self-report data, however, advisors might be suspicious of CA when they observe any or a combination of the following behaviors: failure to attend scheduled advising sessions; failure to seek assistance, even when in obvious academic difficulty; failure to follow through on referrals made by the academic advisor; and/or a general lack of responsiveness

when interacting with academic advisors. Whether or not such behaviors signal the presence of CA, students who engage in them are probably in need of some additional guidance in any case.

Causes of CA in the Academic Advising Setting

Having identified the "at risk" student, what can be done to address that student's CA in the academic advising setting? According to Richmond and McCroskey (1989), the choice of means to reduce CA depends on one's beliefs regarding the cause of CA. There are three major theories that seek to explain the genesis of CA: excessive activation, inappropriate cognitive processing, and inadequate communication skills. Each is relevant to this discussion of academic advising. The following is a summary of an excellent review of the three theories presented by Richmond and McCroskey (1989).

Excessive activation occurs when the normal physiological arousal associated with anticipation of performance increases beyond an individual's ability to control it. This debilitating level of arousal, characterized by excessive sweating, trembling, temporary loss of memory, and so on, has a negative effect on the quality of the performance. The recommended treatment for excessive activation is systematic desensitization. Systematic desensitization involves two components: a) deep muscle relaxation, and b) visualization of the anxiety provoking stimulus while in a state of deep relaxation. The goal is to be able to recreate the state of deep relaxation in the face of the

anxiety provoking stimulus (e.g., giving a speech) in a real-life setting. Available evidence for the success of systematic desensitization for reducing CA suggests that not only does it work, but it works exceptionally well in reducing self-reported levels of CA.

The second major theory explaining the genesis of CA blames inappropriate cognitive processing. This theory suggests that CA occurs because a person labels the normal physiological arousal associated with some performance in a negative manner. For example, a student preparing to give a speech might say to him/herself, "My heart is pounding, so I must be afraid," rather than saying, "My heart is pounding, so I must be excited." The recommended treatment for CA from this perspective is to change the cognitive processing of the student in order to accomplish two goals: a) dispell irrational/negative thoughts, and b) replace them with rational/positive thoughts. Research evidence regarding this cognitive restructuring approach suggests that it is as effective as systematic desensitization at reducing self-reported levels of CA. However, the two approaches appear to work best when used in conjunction with one another.

The third major theory explaining CA argues that inadequate communication skills are to blame. That is, those who are unsure of appropriate communication behavior in some setting experience anxiety as a result of their uncertainty. The interesting thing is that there seems to be little systematic relationship between

CA and adequacy of communication skill. Research in this area seems to indicate that the important factor is not so much the skill level evidenced by the person, but rather, the perception that person has of his/her own skill level, accurate or not. That is, a person who believes him/herself to be deficient may experience CA, whether a skills deficiency exists or not. Conversely, the person who believes him/herself to be skilled may not experience CA, regardless of his/her skill level. The recommended treatment for CA from this perspective is to improve the skills level of those who believe themselves to be deficient, and are truly deficient. Those who believe themselves to be deficient, but are not truly so, need to undergo cognitive restructuring.

Additional advice on working with communicatively apprehensive students comes from Booth-Butterfield (1986), who discovered that students high in CA functioned more effectively in highly structured settings than in less structured settings. The opposite was true for those low in CA, i.e., they functioned best in less structured settings.

Most of the reported research in this area focuses on public speaking as the anxiety provoking stimulus, while we are concerned with academic advising. With a little imagination, it is possible to apply that which was learned through the study of public speaking to a different communication context--academic advising. The balance of the paper will present some suggestions

for practical ways to reduce the anxiety of advisees experiencing dysfunctional levels of CA in the academic advising context. Hopefully, doing so will enable the advisor and advisee to work together more effectively, the goal being the student's swift and sure movement through the institutional maze to timely graduation.

Reducing CA in the Academic Advising Setting

One important note at this point is that many of the techniques described below would not only improve academic advising with communicatively apprehensive students, but with all students. So, one might ask, why don't we use these techniques with all students? The simple answer is the sad truth that although most advisors would like to give each and every student special attention, there simply is not enough time in a day or energy in one person to give every student focused individual attention. Advisors must focus their special attentions on those "at risk" students who really need it. Many students succeed brilliantly, almost on their own, with little or no assistance from academic advisors. In such cases, it seems a little extreme to go to some of the measures described below. However, some students (e.g., "at risk" communicatively apprehensive students), may benefit greatly from an advisor's use of some of the suggested techniques, and in fact, may not succeed in their academic careers at all without such special attention.

One way to reduce CA caused by excessive activation is by doing whatever is possible to reduce students' physiological arousal in the academic advising context. The following is not an atypical picture of a student awaiting advising: crowded, noisy waiting room (or worse, a hallway outside an office door), no idea how long it will be before the student is seen by the advisor (maybe fifteen minutes, maybe an hour or more), inadequate number of chairs to sit in, so students have to make do with the floor--in short--not exactly an easy place to relax. If possible, make special arrangements for communicatively apprehensive students to spare them that nerve-wracking scenario. Reserve a conference room or classroom after regular class hours so there will be adequate waiting room in an uncrowded environment. It might be helpful to set up appointment times in advance, so there won't be prolonged and uncertain waiting times. You might bring a tape player with you and play soft jazz, soft rock or classical music in the background while the students wait. In summary, do whatever you can to provide a relaxing environment for the communicatively apprehensive advisee.

Many students come to the advising session with a variety of negative and irrational thoughts that could lead to increased apprehension. One of the most common of these, in my experience, is the student's feeling of being out of control of his/her own destiny. This fear is evidenced through comments such as, "I'll never graduate," "I don't even know what classes I'm supposed to

take to graduate," or "I am totally confused about what I'm supposed to do." Experienced advisors are not surprised to hear these sorts of comments from upper class students, as well as the less experienced students.

In order to engage in cognitive restructuring with such apprehensive students, the advisor must help the student realize that s/he is in control of his/her destiny (in this case, college education). A good way to do this is to take students through requirements for graduation, one at a time, slowly, so that they actually understand them. It is somewhat time consuming initially, but my experience is that once students are released from "graduation requirement phobia" (e.g., "I can't understand!"), they are empowered to take an active role in their own advising and are far less of an advising burden in the long run. In addition, by debunking the irrational fear of loss of control, apprehensive students, in particular, will enjoy a better advising relationship with the advisor.

A related strategy is to help the apprehensive student to relabel his/her arousal as excitement (or some other positive emotion), rather than dread (or some other negative emotion), at the prospect of an advising session. Simple ways to do this include smiling at the advisee, welcoming him/her into your office (or wherever you are seeing advisees), inviting him/her to take a seat, engaging in a small amount of pre-task chit chat with him/her (e.g., "How are your classes going?" "Are you

looking forward to next semester?"), selling next semester's course offerings, remarking on the student's successful progress toward the awarding of his/her degree, and so on. Unfortunately, advisors are often so overburdened that such simple behaviors are neglected in favor of "efficiency". It is important for advisors to understand that all students, but particularly communicatively apprehensive students, may be damaged, both personally and scholastically, by such treatment. Better to invest the time in cognitive restructuring, such that students label their experiences as gratifying, rather than harmful.

Another cause for apprehension in the advising setting may be traced to perceptions of inadequate task-relevant skill regarding advising. Students, especially apprehensive students, may wonder how they are supposed to behave in the advising session, what documents should they bring, what should they have prepared, what will happen during the advising session, what will they have to do after the advising session. Levels of uncertainty can be high, especially for inexperienced students. High levels of uncertainty can lead to debilitating anxiety.

Uncertainty may be reduced in a variety of straightforward ways. For example, hold general information sessions during pre-registration and/or registration for all interested students, but target the sessions to students who are not experienced with your system of advising. During this information session, lead them through not only the university's registration process, but your

own specific expectations about advising. Tell them such mundane things as what documents to bring, what sorts of questions they will be asked, how long they can expect to spend in an advising session, etc. The introductory general information session can be an important tool for setting expectations for the session, particularly in setting a positive tone for the interaction. Be sure to announce such sessions a number of times in all classes that enroll a large number of advisees.

Another effective means to reduce uncertainty is by setting clear expectations (as described above) and then conforming to them rigorously. Few things confuse and upset students more, especially apprehensive students, than telling them one version of their responsibilities at Time A, and then changing that version at Time B. As much as possible, stick to a routine that students can become familiar and comfortable with. When change is necessary, integrate it slowly, with numerous announcements beforehand and copious explanations and patience during the transition. Written explanations of changes, including references to both the way it used to be and the new procedure, will help make the transition less painful for all students, but particularly for apprehensive students, who are loathe to approach an advisor or a fellow student for assistance or advice.

Booth-Butterfield (1986) found apprehensive students performed better in situations where a high degree of structure was present. It follows from her findings that apprehensive

advisees would benefit from high levels of structure in the academic advising session. A number of recommendations for adding structure and predictability to the advising process have already been described above, but even more can be done with individual students. For example, apprehensive students could be given worksheets to fill out before the advising session that could then be used as a way to structure the meeting itself. Worksheets could contain questions about a variety of things: coursework previously completed, degree requirements fulfilled and/or lacking, schedule requests for the upcoming semester, extra-curricular activities, career planning activities, etc. One caveat to the use of a high degree of structure in the advising session is that such and approach, while working well with communicatively apprehensive students, works poorly with non-apprehensive students. Recall that non-apprehensive students work best in non-structured settings.

One final note about advising the apprehensive student concerns initiating contacts with such students. By their very nature, apprehensive students avoid interactions that provoke anxiety, e.g., with their academic advisor. Therefore, even when they are in serious academic difficulty, they may not seek out the advice or assistance of an advisor. Although students are ultimately responsible for the consequences of their actions, concerned advisors, recognizing the special needs of apprehensive students, can take steps to provide early warning of advisee

trouble. Many professional advisors advocate "intrusive advising" with "at risk" students. Intrusive advising includes measures such as checking with course instructors regarding student progress during the course of the semester, seeking out contacts with students who may be experiencing academic difficulty, etc. In short, rather than waiting for the student to come to the advisor, the advisor goes to the student. Such an approach may have value for advisors working with apprehensive students.

There are no doubt many other techniques that could be used to improve advising of communicatively apprehensive students. I have listed some that make sense given our understanding of the bases for CA, as well as those that I have had good experience with. Although the stated goal of this paper was twofold, i.e., providing a quick and reliable method of identifying students who may experience faculty/academic advisor CA, and suggesting several practical approaches to reducing CA in the academic advising setting, a less public agenda is to raise awareness of the advising needs of all students, not only communicatively apprehensive students. Academic advisors are truly unsung heroes of our profession and deserve our recognition for the fine work they do and the positive effects they have on students' academic careers.

Notes

1 For a complete description of scale development and testing, see ***** (1991).

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Appendix

Faculty/Advisor Communication Measure

Directions: This instrument is composed of six items that concern your feelings about communicating with a member of the faculty (for example, your class instructors or professors in your major department) and academic advisors (people that help you with scheduling classes and so on). If you have never talked to a member of the faculty or to an academic advisor, think about how you expect to feel when communicating with one. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking (in the space provided) whether you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are undecided, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree. Please record your first impression.

_____ 1. While participating in conversations with a member of the faculty or with an academic advisor, I feel (expect to feel) very nervous.

_____ 2. I have no fear (I expect to have no fear) of speaking up in conversations with a member of the faculty or with an academic advisor.

_____ 3. Ordinarily I am (I expect to be) very tense and nervous in conversations with a member of the faculty or with an academic advisor.

_____ 4. Ordinarily I am (I expect to be) very calm and relaxed in conversations with a member of the faculty or with an academic advisor.

_____ 5. While conversing with a member of the faculty or with an academic advisor, I feel (I expect to feel) very relaxed.

_____ 6. I am (I expect to be) afraid to speak up in conversations with a member of the faculty or with an academic advisor.